Lesson 1: Sample Personal Memoir

**My First Life Line**

Throughout my six years as an elementary school student, I was a helpless victim, drowning in a

sea of stressful book reports and searching for a way to express myself in open-ended questions. As entered middle school, however, a life preserver was thrown to me. From the moment it appeared, I

held on tightly until my rescuer taught me to swim on my own.

Mrs. Smith was the high-ranking “officer” at our middle school, whose sole purpose was to

whip her “gifted but undisciplined kids” into shape. I take that back. Introducing sixth-graders to

ulcers was another likely item on her agenda. She had a natural march in her step, setting the

admired and ideal pace for others to follow. Mrs. Smith performed classroom procedures as though

she had repeatedly practiced each one determined to achieve perfection. She was always neat and

proper, never a single hair on her head nor a red pen on her desk out of place. The clarity of her

voice demanded respect and attention, while her tone was often quite frightening. “My class will

separate the men from the boys; the women from the girls; the writers from the dummies.” Despite

her intimidating features, I found myself admiring, even liking this drill sergeant. Her gleaming smile

could provide warmth like rays of sunshine and was always accompanied by some explanatory hand

motion. She rarely grinned without providing some sort of manual or verbal gesture. Mrs. Smith

was extremely blunt with her opinions—complimentary as well as critical ones. She was honest and

truthful, with no strings attached. When asked for help, she would always respond, “I’d love to help

you fix the mess you’ve created, so that someday, you might pass.” Due to the bitingly honest

quality of her critiques, I feared the day she would evaluate one of my papers in class.

Nervously awaiting the return of our first essays my heart thumped with anxiety. Suddenly,

her piercing voice cracked my security shell that had hidden me for the past six years. “Well, I can

see that there is some potential buried beneath all that mumbo-jumbo. The hard part is just digging

it out!” Confused, I searched for the correct response and answered, “Um, Mrs. Smith I don’t have

a shovel to dig.” Of course Mrs. Smith replied, “That’s quite all right. You can use your hands.

Pick up that pencil and go to work.” Until the bell rang, that day, I was lost in a maze of red ink.

My goal was to distinguish between “mumbo-jumbo” writing and writing that, with editing, and

more editing, might become worthy for Mrs. Smith herself to read. Overwhelmed with excitement,

I was determined to receive a “well-written” comment from Mrs. Smith or at least a “not so

mumboy-jumboy!” Sweat, tears, and a lack of sleep were all included in my “IMPRESS MRS.

SMITH MISSION.” Although I was unaware of it at the time, her lovingly strict attitude and

personality had already begun to inspire me.

Mrs. Smith’s sweet perfume danced happily through the air, luring me into her room the

following day at school. Once again, we turned in our essays and awaited the dreaded comments.

Her constant nail tapping was a tension building clock, a constant reminder of the doom that

awaited us all. She always selected her “victims” for each new day, and then focused on her helpless

“prey.” With magnetic eyes, she would irresistibly and forcefully draw students’ attention to her.

With each point of her finger, I waited for her nail to lift me out of my chair and onto my feet.

Eventually, it did. “Well, William,” she always had to recognize the writer before the humiliation

could begin, “I’m quite impressed. You read my ‘red pen advice’ and actually applied it when you

rewrote this paper. I’m really impressed.”

At that moment, Ernest Hemingway and Edgar Allen Poe were my equals. Even

Shakespeare himself could not have put my sixth-grade essay to shame. Just because they had

created several masterpieces did not mean they were “Mrs. Smith Approved.” Whose essay had

“impressed” Mrs. Smith? Mine!

I longed to rush across the room, wrap my arms around her, and burst into joyful tears. Did

she realize what her words meant to me? I desperately wanted to embrace her. For the first time,

someone had taken time to work with me, guide me, and have faith in me and my ability to write.

She helped me find a writing style suitable and meaningful to me. If only she could understand how

I truly admired and viewed her as a “teacher,” someone who earned and deserved that special title.

Words of praise and gratitude filled my mind as I began to pour my heart out to this miraculous

lady. Yet, as a lump rose in my throat, I simply muttered. “Thanks, Mrs. Smith.” For the first time,

without any words, gestures, or laughter, Mrs. Smith just smiled.